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DE RUEHNT #0444/01 1070539
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 160539Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9507
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 3882
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 0095
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 4497
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0364
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0319
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0375
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4091
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2365
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2419
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000444

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/16/2018

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SUBJECT: A/DAS DISCUSSES HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN
UZBEKISTAN

REF: TASHKENT 300

Classified By: Political Officers Tim Buckley and Rich Fitzmaurice for
reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: During her March 27 - April 1 visit to
Tashkent and Bukhara (septels), Acting Deputy Assistant
Secretary of State (A/DAS) for South and Central Asia and

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Public Diplomacy Pamela Spratlen held meetings with a diverse
array of human rights and civil society representatives.
Interlocutors on human rights issues included expatriate
representatives of Human Rights Watch, local human rights
defenders, and USAID-funded implementing partners. There was
a consensus view that while there have been modest steps
forward on human rights, there is little fundamental progress
and still much work to be done. Another commonly-held view
is that engaging the government during this "open window"
period of modest improvement on human rights may lead to more
substantive progress later, but some doubted that any real
change was possible under the current government. End
summary.

Human Rights Roundtable

¶2. (C) On March 28, A/DAS Spratlen, accompanied by Ambassador
and DCM, met at the Embassy with several expatriate and local
representatives of the human rights community in Uzbekistan.
Human Rights Watch (HRW) was represented by country director
Igor Vorontsov and Moscow-based consultant (and former Deputy
Director of HRW's Moscow office) Sasha Petrov, while local
human rights activists were represented by Surat Ikramov and
Rapid Reaction Group member Sukhrobjon Ismoilov. During the
defenders' frank conversation with A/DAS, the differences in
opinion were readily apparent. The local activists disagreed
over the extent to which the U.S. government has kept human

rights at the forefront of its agenda in Uzbekistan, with Ikramov claiming that the U.S. government has often overlooked human rights (although his own organization has been largely supported over the years through the Embassy's Democracy Commission grants), while Ismoilov argued that he had seen evidence of ongoing interest and support for human rights defenders.

13. (C) They were also divided over whether the incidence of torture in prisons and detention centers has recently been on the rise. Ikramov claimed that the situation continues to worsen, while Ismoilov said that he has noticed a decrease in the number of prisoners that show clear physical evidence of abuse, compared to three or four years ago. (Comment: The differences in opinions between the two local activists might be explained by the different approaches taken by their respective organizations. Ikramov's group largely relies on the testimony of detainees' family members when preparing reports, while the Rapid Reaction Group makes a greater effort to verify the information they receive from family members with government bodies. Another member of the Rapid Reaction Group also recently carried out an inspection of a prison in Bukhara province, and the group hopes to conduct more prison visits in the future. End comment.)

14. (C) Despite the disagreements, all did agree on several points, including the fact that the Embassy's Democracy Commission Small Grants program offers rare and valuable support to such defenders. Ismoilov and Ikramov currently receive grants that help them to continue their work, and Petrov said that he had also seen evidence of the value of these grants. Vorontsov said he finds it hard to share the optimism of many foreign governments that the human rights situation in Uzbekistan is improving, saying he has not seen enough signs to draw such a conclusion (Comment: In earlier

conversations with poloff, Vorontsov recognized that the government had made certain improvements on human rights, but he did not believe that they were enough for the European Union to consider dropping its visa ban against selected government officials, which had been temporarily suspended for six months in October 2007. Instead, he argued that the European Union should prolong the suspension for another three months to see whether the government's recent positive steps on human rights would continue. End comment.)

15. (C) The human rights defenders were also fairly unified in assessing how the Embassy can further support them in their work. Vorontsov stated that the U.S. government should continue to press the government to accredit him. Ikramov and Ismoilov suggested that the U.S. government encourage and nurture new, young human rights defenders, as well as provide professional training opportunities for activists of all ages and skills. Ismoilov also suggested pushing the GOU to allow international organizations to return.

Human Rights Watch Director Still Awaiting Accreditation

16. (C) Vorontsov formally applied for accreditation with the Ministry of Justice on February 19, and was told at that time that his accreditation would take approximately one month. As of April 2, Vorontsov was still awaiting accreditation. He has attempted to contact the Ministry of Justice, but they have refused to explain to him why his accreditation has been delayed. Vorontsov speculated to poloff on April 2 that the government may delay making a decision on whether to grant him accreditation until after the European Union decides on whether to reinstate the visa ban in late April. A/DAS Spratlen in later meetings with Foreign Minister Norov and National Security Council Secretary Ataev urged the GOU to accredit the Human Rights Watch representative.

Meeting with Tashkent Human Rights Lawyer

17. (C) On March 28, A/DAS Spratlen and the Ambassador met with human rights attorney Rukhuddin Kamilov, who expressed

skepticism of the government's efforts on human rights. Kamilov argued that recent legal reforms undertaken by the government, including abolishing the death penalty and transferring the power to issue arrest warrants from prosecutors to the judiciary, were enacted largely for public relations purposes. Kamilov doubted that the human rights situation would improve under the current regime, as the ruling class has vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Kamilov noted that corruption had thoroughly permeated the judicial system, observing that public prosecutors officially earn only 150 dollars a month, but some of them are nevertheless able to live "like millionaires."

18. (C) Kamilov acknowledged that some mechanisms for protecting human rights existed in Uzbekistan, but they were largely flawed. He is allowed to represent his clients, who often include human rights activists, in court, but he observed that many of them were unlawfully imprisoned despite his efforts. While he has had a few modest victories, Kamilov said that there are too few human rights defenders, and the human rights defenders themselves need protection. The fundamental problem, he explained, is that there is no real separation of power in the Uzbek government; the president controls the legislative and judicial branches of the government in addition to the executive. Kamilov maintained that real change in the human rights situation in Uzbekistan must come from below, arguing that Uzbeks must create a broader group of human rights activists in society. Kamilov stated that the U.S. should provide direct financial

support to human rights groups in Uzbekistan, along with opportunities for local lawyers to meet and train with human rights lawyers from other countries. He expressed appreciation for what he saw as the Ambassador's key role in the government's decision to grant Kamilov an exit visa after three years of waiting.

USAID implementing partners

19. (C) At a dinner hosted by the AmCit National Democratic Institute (NDI) representative in Tashkent, A/DAS Spratlen and DCM had the opportunity to meet him, Open Dialogue Project Director Mjusa Sever, and the director of a quasi-non-governmental organization (QUANGO), the Institute for the Study of Civil Society, Marijon Usmanov, and his deputy, Mirhamdan Abdullaev. NDI and Open Dialogue, funded by the U.S. government in Uzbekistan, have collaborated occasionally with this QUANGO on seminars and workshops regarding political parties, Islam in society, and NGOs. Sever told the DCM on the fringes of the dinner that she has been working her government contacts to visit imprisoned human rights defender Mutabar Tojiboyeva. Sever cautioned that progress on human rights would be slow, but she remains convinced it is possible.

Bukhara Human Rights Activist Believes "a Window is Open"

110. (C) On March 29 A/DAS Spratlen met in Bukhara with Rapid Reaction human rights group member and director of the Humanitarian Legal Center Shukhrat Ganiev, who shared his views on a variety of human rights-related subjects. He noted that the absence of professionalism among human rights defenders is a major problem that limits effective organization and action. Ganiev lamented the overall human rights situation, but noted that human rights victims and their advocates too often "do not understand laws." He advocated developing an educated, professional cadre of advocates, especially young people, who could help build awareness and develop better advocacy skills. (Comment: Ganiev's fellow member in the Rapid Reaction Group, Sukhrobjon Ismoilov, is one of the only young, active human rights activists known to poloff. Ganiev also recently received an Embassy Democracy commission grant to conduct human rights trainings with doctors and lawyers. End comment.)

¶11. (C) Ganiev spoke at length about long-term trends that affect human rights in Uzbekistan, including clans and Islamic separatism. He said clans in Central Asia have deep historical roots and regional structures that allow elites to bring their own people into key positions that strengthen and consolidate power. In Uzbekistan, he noted the importance of a Bukhara-Samarqand clan with common Tajik bonds, an ethnic Uzbek-dominated Ferghana Valley clan, and a distinct Tashkent clan.

¶12. (C) Ganiev also criticized the Government of Uzbekistan's refusal to provide adequate information to the populace. In the resulting "vacuum of information," rumors quickly spread around the country. "The bazaar," he noted, "is like the Internet." However, false sources and unfounded information hurt both the government and human rights defenders, as was the case in the aftermath of the Andijon events in 2005, according to Ganiev.

¶13. (C) On the subject of international NGOs, Ganiev said Uzbekistan needs them because civil society is so weak. However, he said it is a big mistake for them to pursue such different strategies in Uzbekistan simultaneously. The

result, he believes, is that "the human rights audience is confused and divided." He also stressed the need to balance good information with the bad, both not to appear to be digging only for bad information and likewise not to appear to be pandering to the government.

Comment:

¶14. (C) The human rights defenders of Uzbekistan operate in an environment filled with personal risks and multiple pressures. Despite their small numbers and embattled organizations, they remain committed to fighting for human rights progress in Uzbekistan. We were struck that all were able to meet with A/DAS Spratlen without interference and all spoke frankly, whether pessimistic or hopeful about Uzbekistan's future. They offered mixed views on the role and utility of sanctions. All reinforced the importance of U.S. support for human rights in Uzbekistan in the form of grants and political support, particularly in this window of some movement by the government.

¶15. (U) A/DAS Spratlen has cleared this telegram.

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